



Marsha Wienert is the state tourism liaison, a position Gov. Linda Lingle created to coordinate policies between the visitor industry and the state. She's been on the job for a year this month.

Q+A

MARSHA WIENERT

Q: The Legislature has been tussling over the funding of your position. How does it feel to have people debating whether your job should even exist?

A: Well, of course, it's not pleasant, no question about that. I think there was a concern at the Legislature about whether my position duplicated what the Hawai'i Tourism Authority is doing. I think by the end of the session everyone understood that it is actually a completely different role. The governor's idea for this position is an excellent one, because it really brings tourism issues to the Capitol, so that tourism is taken into account no matter what the discussion.

I try to say that I don't promote tourism. I'm really here to look at a much broader picture, tourism overall and how it affects the state, and then being the conduit between the industry and various parts of the government.

Q: After being on the job for a year now, how would you evaluate the relationship between the tourism industry and state government?

A: I think that communication between all sectors of the visitor industry has improved tremendously. I think various sectors of the visitor industry felt that their voice wasn't being heard, especially at the government level. I've had phenomenal meetings with ecotour providers, retailers, the restaurant industry, the accommodations industry, in which I ask them, what do we in the government need to do to assist you? And they have very good ideas. The out-of-the-box thinking that's coming from smaller businesses, especially, is refreshing to me.

Q: You were executive director of the Maui Visitors Bureau for almost a decade. Is there a difference between tourism promotion on Maui and O'ahu?

A: I think there is, and that's what's good about our state. Each island has its own personality. We are a very diverse destination. Because of the diversity, we can appeal to many different sectors of the traveling public. Moloka'i, for example, is really a hidden secret, compared to what you have on O'ahu. Marketing becomes easier when you have that kind of diversity, and as we move forward, you're going to see that diversity talked about a lot more, on the domestic and the international level.

Q: What's your forecast for Hawai'i's tourism industry?

A: Normally, as a marketing person, you always say, "Optimistically cautious." That's the catch phrase. But I can tell you that every indicator points to a phenomenal year for Hawai'i. I went out on a limb last October and said I thought 2004 was going to be the best year we've ever had, and I'm sticking with that. The big caveat is that there is not some uncontrollable phenomenon that affects tourism. Since Sept. 11, that concern is always there.

MICHAEL KEANY